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ABSTRACT

This survey investigates 6 major questions: (1) do adolescents and their parents perceive youth as overindulged; (2) are parent-child communication channels open; (3) has understanding between parents and their children broken down; (4) do children identify with their parents; (5) has discipline been permissive; and (6) do adolescents reject the Establishment? Results are based on a national sample of 2,000 10th through 12th graders, randomly selected to match 1960 census distributions for sex, grade in school, residence and geographic region. Some data on parents was also obtained. The findings include: (1) as a gripe about youth, overindulgence ranks very low; (2) the degree of influence in family decisions correlates positively with parent-to-child and child-to-parent visibility, (3) half the parents were reported as "moderately strict," only 7% as "not at all strict;" (4) evidence indicates that children do identify with their parents when it comes to ranking gripes about youth today; and (5) 6-12% of the sample are skeptical about joining the Establishment. (Author/TL)

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Parent-child Interactions

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Abstract

The present survey is an investigation of some aspects of parent-child interaction. The following questions are asked: (1) do adolescents and their parents perceive youth as overindulged, (2) are parent-child communication channels open, (3) has understanding between parents and their children broken down, (4) do children identify with their parents, (5) has discipline been permissive, and (6) do adolescents reject the Establishment?

In December 1969, the Purdue Opinion Panel surveyed approximately 12,000 adolescents in U. S. public and private schools, grades ten through twelve. Results are based on a national sample of 2,000 with random selection to match the 1960 Census distributions for sex, grade in school, residence (rural-urban), and geographic region. Information was obtained about parents' education, birth order, achievement, and participation in extra-curricular activities.

As a gripe about youth today, overindulgence is ranked low by adolescents and their parents. No significant trends or relationships appear with income level or parents' education.

Very significant (beyond .001) relationships appear between reports of degree of influence in family decisions and parent-child visibility, keeping secrets from parents, parents' understanding of children, and contribution as a family member. Degree of influence appears to be positively related to child-to-parent and parent-to-child visibility.

Half the parents (49%) were reported as "moderately strict," only 7% as "not at all strict."

Evidence for children's identification with parents is found in similarity of ranks for gripes about youth today: (1) use of drugs, (2) lack of respect for authority, (6) overindulgence, and (7) impatience.

Acceptance of the Establishment appears to be positively related to (1) achievement, (2) income level, (3) extent of participation in extra-curricular activities, and (4) influence in family decisions. Six to 12% of the sample are skeptical about joining the Establishment; they tend (a) to have poor school achievement, (b) to lack participation in activities, (c) to report little influence in family decisions, (d) to be secretive with parents, (e) to think children help enough at home, (f) to think parents do not know what children think, (g) to think parents approve no qualities in them, and (h) to have few complaints about youth today.

In the past decade, young people have shown considerable dissatisfaction with the Establishment. Evidence for the dissatisfaction is seen in questions about, or rejection of, traditional beliefs in social customs and mores, religion, politics, economics, and philosophy. Youthful unrest is not localized but can be found in countries throughout the world. Parents have frequently been blamed, and have felt guilty, for the unrest, said to stem from parental physical, emotional, and spiritual neglect of their children as a consequence of preoccupation with the acquisition of material possessions." (Erlick, 1970)

The purpose of the present survey is to investigate some aspects of the parent-child interaction. Specifically, the purpose of the study is to determine: (1) if young people today are perceived as overindulged, (2) if parent-child communication channels are open, (3) if understanding between parents and children has broken down, (4) if children identify with their parents, (5) if parents have been permissive in disciplining children, and (6) if students reject the Establishment.

In December, 1969, approximately 12,000 students in U. S. public and private schools, grades ten through twelve were surveyed by the Purdue Opinion Panel. A sample of 2000 was drawn with stratification to match the 1960 Census distributions according to age, sex, residence (urban - rural), and geographic region. Information was also obtained concerning parents' education, course grades, birth order, and participation in extra-curricular activities. In the family, children observe their parents closely in order to cope with conflicts which arise out of human interaction. Observations are made of attitudes as well as actions, what parents say as well as what they do.

"In this survey, students were asked to give certain attitudes and actions of their parents. The responses given may represent a true picture of parental attitudes and actions, resulting from years of observations by their children. On the other hand, the responses may be distortions of parental attitudes and actions due to faulty perceptions which stem from distracting stimuli within the observer or the situation. Students' perceptions, whatever their degree of accuracy, are the material used to deal with human problems. Parents may be neither as strict or restrictive as represented, nor as lenient or permissive. In human relations, children can act as if they perceive accurately." (Erlick, 1970)

Strict parents may take action to correct faulty perceptions sooner than lenient parents. If this is true, then perceptions of strict parents could be expected to represent more accurately parental attitudes and actions than those of lenient parents. Children's perceptions of lenient parents may over- or under-represent parental attitudes and actions; these children may respond to ambiguous situations with their parents in ways widely discrepant from that predicted or intended. Lenient parents probably have greater problems in communicating than strict parents. Lenient parents may be sending out signals which differ significantly from those perceived, interpreted, and acted upon by the children.

In this study, parental leniency in permitting children to go out as often as they please is accompanied by greater frequencies of students' reports both of a great deal and little or no influence in family decisions which affect them.

Parental leniency with freedom to go out is ambiguous; it may be perceived as not caring, or as caring a great deal about the child. Children who feel their parents care for them and trust them enough to be lenient may feel a great deal of influence in family decisions. Children who feel their parents do not care enough to restrict them may feel little or no influence in the family. Children may or may not be accurately observing their parents.

Autonomy is defined (Erlick, 1968) as the degree of influence students feel in family decisions directly affecting them. Evidence of a positive relationship is found between autonomy and grade in school, course grades, income group and mother's level of education. A negative relationship is found between autonomy and mother's strictness as a disciplinarian.

In the present study, responses to students' feeling of influence are compared with parent-child visibility, keeping secrets, parents' understanding of children, and students' contribution as a member of the family. Very significant (chi square beyond the .001 level) relationships are found for each comparison.

The following are found to be characteristic of students who report autonomy or high degrees of influence: (1) they tend "seldom" or "never" to keep secrets from parents, (2) "reading them like a book" is "quite a bit" or "very much" characteristic of their parents, (3) parents are not difficult to reach as human beings, (4) parents understand them "moderately" to "very well," and (5) they themselves contribute "very much" as a member of their family.

Typical punishment for students with autonomy is more likely to have been discussion with agreement on action while students with little autonomy are more likely to have had some physical form of punishment.

Students with autonomy differ significantly (chi square beyond the .001 level) from students with little autonomy in characteristics approved by their parents. Parents of students with autonomy are most likely to approve their childrens' good values, character and independent thinking. Students with little autonomy are most likely to report their parents approve of none, or fewer than expected, of the characteristics listed.

The following are found to be characteristic of students reporting little autonomy: (1) their parents are less likely than other parents to want their children to spend their free time with them, (2) their parents are more likely than other parents to disapprove of a lot of children's time being spent away from home, (3) their mothers are more intrusive than other parents in expecting children to tell everything that happens away from home, (4) both parents are more intrusive than other parents in asking other people about their children, (5) neither parent is as likely as other parents to feel hurt when children fail to follow their advice, (6) both parents are more likely than other parents to think their children ungrateful when they disobey, (7) both parents are stricter than other parents about broken rules, and (8) in general, their parents tend to be less predictable, to show a wider range of behavior than other parents.

The concept of overindulgence is relative, depending upon: (a) what one had last year or five years ago, (b) what one feels he could or should have, (c) what the Jones' have, and (d) what is available. In this study, overindulgence is defined as "having too many possessions and too much money." As a gripe about young people today, overindulgence is ranked very low in the list by students and for their parents. No significanttrends or relationships appear when responses are compared with variables which might be expected to differentiate; e.g., income level, parents' education, etc.

In this study, it is assumed that communication between parents and their children can be inferred from: (1) the communication of parental value systems, (2) parent-child visibility, and (3) typical types or forms of punishment used.

If, as Aldridge (1969) proposed, family communication had broken down because parents are so often bland, tolerant, well-meaning, and anxiously solicitous, then children might be unable to report their parents' strongly held values. Quite the contrary is found in this study. Students report wide range of parental gripes about young people today as well as characteristics in the young which parents like. Blandness does not appear to be characteristic of parents.

It is held that parent-child communication hinges to some extent upon visibility or the ability to reach and understand one another. If parent-child communication has broken down, then parent-child visibility might be lacking.. Visibility in this study is defined with reference to: (1) keeping secrets from parents, (2) parents' ability to "read" their children like a book, (3) students' ability to reach their parents, and (4) parents' understanding their children.

Keeping secrets restricts communication. In this study, 47% of all the students do keep secrets from parents "frequently" to "always". The tendency to keep secrets from parents is significantly (chi square beyond .001) related to the degree of influence felt in family decisions. As the degree of influence increases, students decrease in tendency to keep secrets from parents.

To child visibility by parents, 57% of all the students report their parents can "read them like a book" from some extent to very much; 24% of the students said this is not very much characteristic of their parents.

To parent visibility by students, 30% of all the students definitely disagree and 23% probably disagree that "parents are hard to reach as human beings: it's hard to know what fun they get out of life, what their goals in life are." Sixteen percent of the students definitely agree that parents are hard to reach.

A relationship is found between students' feeling of influence and the child-to-parent and parent-to-child visibility. Visibility and influence are positively related; visibility and the degree of influence increase in the same direction and the same proportions. These relationships are highly significant (chi square beyond .001).

Of all the students in the study, 52% report that their parents understand them "moderately" to "very well." Sixteen percent say their parents understand them "not very well" or "not at all." A very significant (chi square beyond .001) relationship is found between parental understanding and students' feeling of influence. Understanding and influence are positively related with increases in the same direction.

Punishment is viewed in this study as a unique form of communication between parents and children. Students reported the strictness of their parents and the most typical form of punishment used. As disciplinarians, 49% of the parents are reported as "moderately strict," 27% as "not very strict," and 7% as "not at all strict." The most typical forms of punishment are: (1) "be yelled at or 'bawled out,'" 40% of all students; (2) "lose some privilege (forbidden to see friends, drive car, go some place special, etc.)" 35% of all students; (3) "physical (slapping, hitting, etc.)," 16% of all students; (4) "discuss and agree on action," 13% of all students; and (5) "family stops speaking to you," 2% of all students.

Consistency between parents for some disciplinary measures is noted. Neither parent tends to excuse children's bad conduct; course grades tend to increase as firmness with conduct increases. Students who report "little or no" influence in family decisions also report that their parents do not expect them to spend all their free time with them but do disapprove of their spending a lot of time away from home. Both parents tend to put some restrictions on free time. Although parents tend not to keep the home in order by having a lot of rules and regulations, parents are fairly strict about broken rules; the use of a lot of rules and regulations is negatively related to parents' level of education while strictness over broken rules is unrelated to parents' education. Parents give freedom to children to pick friends; this freedom is positively related to income level. Restriction is placed on freedom to go out freely. Parents tend to give some direction in how to do work but to have little need to control everything children do. Parents tend to be firm with discipline, both parents being firmer with daughters. Neither parent tends to ask others what children do away from home; when parents do ask, they tend to ask about sons rather than daughters. Both parents tend to control through guilt, to feel hurt when their advice is not followed or to think children are ungrateful when disobedient.

Differences between parents are found for some interactions with children. Fathers expect sons rather than daughters to spend free time with them although fathers are less possessive of free time than mothers. Mothers rather than fathers expect children to tell everything that happens away from home, especially children with very low grades. Although differences are not large, fathers tend to be stricter than mothers. Fathers give more direction to sons rather than daughters; no differences are found for mothers. Students with very low grades report two types of fathers: (a) those wanting to control everything they do, and (b) those not wanting to control everything. Students' course grades increase when fathers are strict with assigned work. The following characteristics are found for mothers of students with very low grades: (1) more expect children to tell everything that happens away from home, (2) more ask others about their children, (3) more keep the home in order with a lot of rules and regulations, (4) more are permissive in permitting children to pick their friends, (5) fewer give direction to children, (6) more are lax with discipline, and (7) more excuse children's bad conduct.

Evidence that students identify with their parents can be seen in the remarkable similarity in ranking gripes about young people today. Parents and students agree in ranking use of drugs first, lack of respect for authority second, overindulgence sixth, and impatience seventh. Students rank undisciplined behavior third while parents rank it fifth; proportions of responses for parents and students are similar, however. Apparently students think the problems with young people stem more from undisciplined rather than irresponsible behavior; parents appear to hold opposite views. Ranks for gripes would be identical for parents and students if the same emphasis were placed on undisciplined behavior.

Had it been possible, it would be interesting to compare the responses obtained in this study with attitudes and opinions of students in 1941, when the Purdue Opinion Panel started. Whether attitudes of students today differ significantly from those of students following the depression years, or later war years, is difficult to determine. Comparisons are impossible since the questions in the present survey were not used in the same way earlier. This report can offer only what students of today say.

Parents, in general,tend neither to have been bland with their children nor lacking in encounters for abrasiveness. While parents have many concerns about young people today, parents approve a wide range of positive characteristics in their children.

In general, students tend to feel that they have contributed much as a member of their family but that children should help more than they do. Students tend to feel understood by their parents and to think children understand their parents. On the issue of concerns about young people today, students tend to identify with their parents. Neither parents nor students see overindulgence as a major concern about youth. Parents are viewed as moderately strict disciplinarians.

Some disturbances in parent-child communication appear. Nearly half the students keep secrets from parents. A fourth of the students feel their parents do not know what their children are thinking. Sixteen percent of the students believe that their parents are hard to reach as human beings. Sixteen percent of the students feel their parents do not understand them.

Whatever the Establishment means to students, only 34% of the students are inclined to accept the Establishment. Nearly half of the students take a tentative approach which could result in either accepting or rejecting the Establishment. The inclination to accept the Establishment appears to be related to active participation in the Establishment: (a) achievement in school, (b) participation in extra-curricular activities, (c) autonomy or influence in family decisions, and (d) high family income.

Rejection of the Establishment is reported by 6% to 12% of all the students in the study, representing between 900,000 to 2,700,000 young people in this age group in the United States. In general, rejection of the Establishment appears to be related to lack of participation in the Establishment: (a) to poor achievement in school, (b) to non-participation in extra-curricular activities, and (c) to little autonomy or influence in family decisions. Of interest is the fact that some rejecters of the Establishment are in the high income group so that choice is available.

When compared to other parents, parents of rejecters of the Establishment tend to exhibit a wider range of behavior, from very permissive to very strict. Rejecters tend (a) always to keep secrets from parents, (b) to think children help enough at home now, (c) to say parents do not know what their children are thinking, (d) to say their parents approve of none of the characteristics that other parents approve in their children and (e) to have fewer complaints about young people today.

An exact definition for the Establishment is unknown. At times it seems to refer to those traditional aspects of culture accumulated over time. A definition for "rejection of the Establishment" is also inexact. At times it appears to mean complete destruction of organized society with high hopes that, by some miracle, utopia will spring from the rubble. No attempt is made in this study to define the Establishment. It is, therefore, impossible to determine what the Establishment means to students. All that can be reported are students' responses to the statement given.

Six percent of all the students in this study report they never will "hold the same beliefs as the Establishment and work within the authority of the Establishment." This response in the sample is equivalent to 900,000 students from the total population of this age group in the United States. Another 12% say they might hold the same beliefs, but it is doubtful. These two groups are considered the "rejecters" of the Establishment.

Thirteen percent of all the students say, "I know I will," and 21% say, "I suppose I will some day," hold the same beliefs as the Establishment. These two groups are considered the "accepters" of the Establishment.

A positive relationship is found between accepting the Establishment and (a) course grades, (b) family income level, (c) the number of extra-curricular activities participated in, and (d) influence in family decisions. There are more accepters of the Establishment when grades and income level are high, with participation in extra-curricular activities, and with greater degrees of influence. There are more rejecters when grades and influence are low and when non-participants in activities. An interesting relationship is found between income level and attitudes about the Establishment. Students in the average and low income groups tend to give more tentative responses ("maybe and maybe not; I don't know") rather than accepting or rejecting responses. Students in the high income group tend to give more responses both accepting and rejecting the Establishment.

As another test for rejection of the Establishment, students were asked in what way children should help the family more than they do. Only 16% of all the students say that children help enough now. Attitudes toward helping the family and autonomy or feelings of influence in family decisions are significantly related (chi square beyond the .001 level). Students with autonomy are more likely to feel that children should help clean the house and give from their earnings; they are less likely than expected, however, to think they should share in decision-making. Students with little autonomy are more likely to think they should share in decision-making or that children help enough now, but not as likely to think they should help clean the house.

When parental approved characteristics of children are compared by region of the United States, very significant (chi square beyond .001 level) differences are found between regions. Students in the South report greater incidence of parental approval for their ambition, independent thinking, and willingness to speak up, but smaller incidence of approval for their good values, character and enthusiasm when compared with students in the other regions. Reports of a great deal of influence in family decisions are accompanied by reports of parental approval for independent thinking and willingness to speak up. Parental approval for independent thinking is greater for only children, living in rural areas of the South, from low income group, and students whose grades are not very low. It should be interesting to investigate the impact of the parental value system in the South on those educational, social, economic, and political factors with which society is now faced.

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